

# Designing Cities That Care with Alexandra Lange

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## SPEAKERS

Greg Lindsay, Alexandra Lange

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### Greg Lindsay 00:04

Hello, and welcome to threesixtyCITY by NewCities, a podcast delving into the future of urban life. I'm your host, Greg Lindsay. Care has become urbanists watchword of late, nearly two years after the pandemic exposed a crisis of care for children, seniors, and cities alike. More recently the urban designer Justin Garrett Moore has called for a Department of care for New York City to manage the public realm across departments thinking through a more holistic approach to how we care for the city and for each other. While new models of care-based co-housing are proliferating and are among the exhibits on display currently in Montreal at the Canadian Centre for Architecture's, new exhibit A Section of Now. NewCities is proud to present an event on December 3, tying in to this notion of designing for a future of care. But what does it mean to actually design for care? And is this just the latest buzzword destined to be hollowed out and turned into care-center design? For the season finale of this year's threesixtyCITY, it's my pleasure to have on Alexandra Lange, critic, writer, and also of course, author of the Design of Childhood, to discuss what it means to care. So thanks for joining us, Alexandra.

### Alexandra Lange 01:28

Thanks for having me.

### Greg Lindsay 01:30

Let's start by unpacking the recent piece you wrote in Bloomberg CityLab, which is why we have you on here today, where you explored care through all of its facets. As a first question, can you talk a bit about why care is having a moment or where you first started hearing this? Justin gets the most credit for this because of his concrete proposal, but it seems like that word has been in the air for at least the last 18 months or so, since the pandemic began.

### Alexandra Lange 01:52

A lot of the people I ended up approaching to talk about care, were like, we've been talking about this for years, it's just the pandemic brought a lot of these issues, especially relating to children and parenting in the US, to the forefront. Because people's children were literally in the frame in Zoom meetings, it forced a lot of people to confront how we deal with children, and how society helps and does not help parents. So I think this is a topic that's been percolating for a long time. But suddenly, people who weren't forced to think about this before had it in front of them.

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Greg Lindsay 02:34

It reminds me in some ways of like the 15-minute city approach as a sort of urbanist proposal and reaction against the obvious failings of the systems as they exist. You unpack care at both an urban level, and the failures of various civic officials to rethink the public realm, but also how we approach housing. Everyone's been grappling with the pandemic at an individual level, whether it's moving in with family members to care for elderly, etc. And these are all sort of collective proposals, another effort to basically design our way out. Have you seen any concrete successes of this, or what can we point to as how this idea is proliferating or where it's really gained traction?

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Alexandra Lange 03:11

I feel like so many things come back to the open streets movement during the pandemic. It is a place where people in numerous cities actually changed the way they were using the physical realm. And a lot of that has been temporary architecture, but now we're seeing cities trying to write that into their codes, like write that into their transportation provisions. And I think those streets, especially if we push them beyond just restaurants, and start thinking of them as potentially play streets, community streets, all these other things, are probably the first wave of care-based design that we can see developing, and that should be developed in a more robust manner, really, so that it can be equitable.

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Greg Lindsay 03:56

Interesting. Besides Justin Garrett Moore's proposal, which I believe was for the Center for an Urban Future, have you seen any other concrete designs or proposals for this? Because this idea has sort of been in the air, Project for Public Spaces I know has advanced the idea for years, that there should be a department of streets in their case or the Gehl Institute at one point proposed a National Street Service for thinking this through. Has anyone instituted this or started thinking about how you would rewire city bureaucracy to create a department of the public realm?

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Alexandra Lange 04:23

I mean, not really, frankly. Part of what the story was talking about is how both our cities and our professions are so siloed. We believe that people can only do one thing, like we can take care of the streets, but social services are a different department. We can take care of the streets, but like play is a different department. And I think what we started to see more and

more of during the pandemic was that you can't silo these things because they are all intimately connected. So yeah, I think it's gonna take a much bigger kind of rethink about how cities organize themselves. And, you mentioned my book, the Design of Childhood, and when I was doing a lot of interviews after that came out, one thing that came up was should cities have a department of children? That is not just about child welfare or not just about education, but also about how children can occupy the city. And I was all for that, I thought maybe we should have a kid mayor, like, not a child who is like a mayor, but a deputy mayor who thinks about all things children. That is another kind of position of care. And it goes to this ongoing problem that if you start siloing these things you don't get good solutions.

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Greg Lindsay 05:44

Now, that's a great idea. I'd love to see that advanced. If we could have night mayors around the world in charge of nightlife. And I believe it's Vienna that has a deputy mayor who's in charge of thinking about the public realm through the lens of women and their needs. You mentioned your book, the Design of Childhood, and we were discussing earlier how originally it was people reaching out to you about teaching your book, because of the lack of resources and thinking about this. And I'm curious, what have your conversations with architects and educators, and others been like about how do we even create a curriculum? What does it mean to even talk about care? What's the first framing for this really and what does it touch?

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Alexandra Lange 06:24

What I was saying before was that care was not a word that I had necessarily applied to my own work. I've been thinking about childhood and children and how we do and do not design for them. But people were reaching out to me who were teaching housing studios, who were teaching parks and landscape studios, who were even teaching playground design in the sculpture department. And they were all assigning different parts of the Design of Childhood. And the rubric for their studios kept including this word "care". So I was alerted to what was happening in academia through that and I thought, okay, it's fascinating to me that people are talking about care in all of these different design realms. And that childhood is actually something that travels between these design realms. And I felt like that was really powerful. And then it was just really interesting to see how responsive the students are to this idea. I wrote my book, and I say this in the introduction, because when I was in architecture school, nobody ever talked about children. They didn't talk about their own children, as professors, they didn't talk about children as somebody for whom you should design. So I was really happy to see that studios are starting to consider children as clients, and that students are really much more open to this than the older generation. They latch on to the idea of care, they latch on to the idea of the importance of childhood and family really easily. So I think some of the momentum for this is probably going to come from younger people and from studios.

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Greg Lindsay 08:03

What's interesting given the discussions about the Build Back Better reconciliation bill, if it passes, what that means for this. I bring it up because the discussions around a Green New Deal led to educational efforts, like the Green New Deal Superstudio, and efforts to get educators in thinking about how this would actually be implemented in the public realm. I'm

curious, has anyone come up with a large holistic approach in terms of rethinking what housing and our support structure should be like? I mean, Senator Elizabeth Warren, for example, has proposed free childcare for Americans, among others. How would that actually be built or actually implemented? And are they starting to grapple with these things in the establishment or others in the profession?

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Alexandra Lange 08:45

Actually, as part of that Green New Deal Studio, the McHarg Center also put out this report about retrofitting schools to be more environmentally sound. If you go down through the recommendations in that report, you can see that a lot of it actually would also create better social and community environments within those schools. If we're going back into schools, and trying to make them more environmentally responsible, and trying to improve the health, essentially, of the students in the school and the healthiness of the environment. You're also kind of activating care principles of maintenance, of allowing the community more active use of those schools, playgrounds, etc. So I think that strand, like retrofitting schools with a care agenda, is probably the most advanced. But I think that the open streets movement, again, could lead to an advance of the argument for more child safety in cities, which ends up leading to more play streets, safe routes to school, protected bike lanes, all of these things that transit advocates have been talking about for a long time, and can potentially open up the city to allow children a lot more freedom, which in fact saves their parents a lot of time. I talked about it a little bit in the article, the Build Back Better, talking about parental leave and childcare. If we build cities that are more supportive for children's independence, that is actually like a child care benefit, because children don't need to be supervised individually, one on one. And this is something I get into much more in the last chapter of the childhood book, which is on cities. About how all of these things are really intricately connected. It's not a simple solution. And I feel like a lot of times when you're presenting things publicly, people want there to be one solution. And that's why the Department of Care proposal is so appealing, because it makes it into a thing. But really there are all these strands that just have to come together. And it's a complex thing.

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Greg Lindsay 11:01

Well obviously, you've written a lot more about the design of childhood than for seniors. But I'm curious, your thoughts at the other end as well. Because, number one, particularly in Canada 80% of the early deaths of the pandemic happened in senior centers, which led to calls for investigations and rethinking what the senior care model is. And also, a lot of the intergenerational living that's happening in United States right now happens in the sense of it's mostly families and buying large suburban homes and trying to basically work it out themselves. There's no real model for thinking through what intergenerational living should look like, except for perhaps one off developments. I'm curious your thoughts on this, because avid fans of this will know that one of our previous guests last season was Marisa Moran Jahn, who's co-creator of the Carehaus proposal that will be discussed at the CCA on December 3, which is the idea that you would actually have care recipients, elderly and disabled, who would receive care from middle aged caregivers who would then age into place there. There's a first project going on in Baltimore, but it's a sort of new model for pushing for this. Alexandra, I was curious if you saw in your research for this any other approaches? Is co-housing's time finally

come, are we finally ready to think through and design for new living arrangements that could perhaps take advantage of intergenerational families and other kinds of lifestyle arrangements?

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Alexandra Lange 12:24

I think co-housing has great potential and as I mentioned to you before, my mother actually lives in co-housing, though it's not as intergenerational as some of the founders wanted it to be. I think the Carehaus Project and also in my article, I mentioned a project by French 2D, outside Boston, which is also an intergenerational housing project. And what both of those projects have in common is this idea of designing now, but designing for flexibility. So designing a courtyard where people can look out from their kitchens and supervise their children while still making dinner, but also making sure that that courtyard is accessible and doesn't have too many steps so as people age in place, they won't be cut off from the exterior realm. And I think, obviously, some of those positions are in Carehaus too, like trying to create more communal environments, and maybe shrink the sizes of individual housing, and think about the proximities of caregiving to the recipients of that care. Because another thing that came up a lot during the pandemic was realizing how far essential workers lived from their jobs, which is an economic issue, a transportation issue, and all of these things, and so trying to build that into future housing is a super important thing to do.

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Greg Lindsay 13:46

You mentioned earlier, the notion of having children as the client. In architecture, it's all about who the client is, and what the client wants. I bring it up because how do we start to rethink the client in this? Or have architects started grappling with how to better incorporate the actual end user needs into this. I made a joke earlier about care-centered design. I mean, the notion of human-centered design was a revolution, oh my gosh, maybe we should put people at the center of this. And that's been watered down by successive generations. But, it's interesting to me that Lacaton & Vassal, who won the Pritzker, and if I understand correctly, a lot of their work is all housing retrofits and involves intimately talking to residents about how they can help. It seems like there's a bit of a sea change perhaps happening in the profession about talking to the actual end user of your project to help them rethink what it is. And I'm curious about whether this is the gateway drug to that as well, is care the way to get architects to actually listen to their end user?

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Alexandra Lange 14:45

It would be nice to think so. I like to think of it like yes, talking to the user, but also reintroducing the element of time into architecture because retrofits are talking about time. These buildings no longer suit the people that are living in them, and the same thing goes for some of these co-housing projects. To create a project in which people have the ability to move from a three bedroom to a one bedroom without enormous financial consequences when their housing needs change. So I think it requires an upfront investment of time on the part of the architects to do those interviews to really understand the community and not just project their ideas of what people need onto the community, and then potentially come back later and make changes. So it would take more effort. But I think one of the things that I was talking about in

the article is that you can't just apply this word "care" like a buzzword. The profession itself, the individual architects, have to make a commitment to spending the time to do these things. And also, frankly, to look at the way they structure their own offices. Architects are notorious for overwork and many small firms don't have good childcare policies, expect people to work late, all of that. So, there's a need to look inward as well as outward, if you're trying to seriously do this work.

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Greg Lindsay 16:15

That's what struck me in particular, going back to Justin Garrett Moore's proposal, is that it ultimately wasn't about architecture, right? It was about basically creating, not just city departments, but also programming. I think it was beyond the scope of your piece, but I am curious if you've seen other programs or initiatives to think about human management. Shannon Mattern brought that up in her 2018 essay on maintenance and care and there's been various efforts. I think there's like the hashtag #themaintainers about honoring the people who keep systems running and thinking this through. Did anyone come up there about how do we start to shift from building to maintaining? There's all sorts of political incentives to open new train lines, but not take care of the ones you have, etc. I'm curious about what the wave of innovation is in that. I wonder if there's some fertile area in that about like, how do we create new forms of involving people or new ways of managing people or new forms of programming the built realm, versus just simply building it? Did anything catch your eye while you were recording the piece on that?

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Alexandra Lange 17:24

I would say two things. One is, I think that there's definitely a cadre of architects now who want to use their architectural training to design better systems rather than designing better buildings. And I think a department of care, maintenance, all of this stuff is a potential area for the kind of big picture organizational thinking that is required of architects to be applied to social systems and community systems. And the second one is, I think that there are a lot of people who are already doing this care work, but it's not part of their job description. I'm thinking particularly of librarians, who end up providing a lot of social services and also child care in public libraries. I'm also thinking about police departments, who end up policing the unhoused, when really the unhoused should be offered social services. So I think that the potential is to realign what we're paying for and what people's titles are with what they're really doing, and making sure that people who are trained for those jobs are the ones doing it. And part of what that is, is changing our system of priorities to prioritize and also valorize care and not put that at the end of the line for funding, or have those people live at the end of the line in terms of transit, because they're not really paid a living wage.

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Greg Lindsay 18:58

No, absolutely. And there have been at least theoretical proposals to grapple with that. Your mention of the police made me think of Jeanne Gangs Polis Station and other efforts to reconceptualize what that means.



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Alexandra Lange 19:08

I would take that funding away from the police and give it to people. I'm on the more radical end of that position.

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Greg Lindsay 19:18

There was there was some pushback on that proposal at the Chicago Architecture Biennial, I remember. I'd love to hear your thoughts on what the skeptics who you quoted in your piece thought about this. Because, again, this idea that it's a buzzword really stands out here. And it reminds me in a way, we always start to see the sad trajectory, where the wave of forces and thinking after George Floyd's murder, where really a moment of trying to grapple with systemic racism in the public realm, sort of faded. Now we just have, the deathless acronym DEI, which stands for diversity, equity inclusion, which just gets tossed around, a box to check at conferences now. So I'm curious is care bound to fall on that trajectory until we rethink this as well? Will it actually mature into something before it reaches that phase? You talked to some educators who weren't quite sure.

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Alexandra Lange 20:13

In my piece, I quoted Garnette Cadogan who teaches at MIT and is really a terrific essayist. And he was one of the first people to have a seminar that had the word care in the title and also to assign my work in that seminar. When I talked to him and told him I was doing this piece, he sent me all these snarky texts saying, like basically he was afraid that care was the new black. That this was a trendy thing that people were just applying to their existing work without really thinking it through to try to make it seem like they were keeping up with the times. And I definitely take his point. I mean, that's why I said what I said before, about architects also having to look within and thinking about their own dialogue practices and the way that they're running their own firms. Because you can easily put a veneer of care and start talking about child care policies over the work that you are already doing. Or you can really dig in and think about, okay, how is this apartment building that I'm designing actually going to help parents in their day to day lives? Are the hallways wide enough to store a stroller, can you see the courtyard from your kitchen? You just have to reorient yourself, again, thinking of children and families as a client. And, that's gonna take some time and some thoughtfulness which not everybody is willing to do.

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Greg Lindsay 21:44

That's a very polite way of putting it there. Well, I think you've given me enough to pivot here. So when you mentioned earlier, the idea of designing a public realm and designing sightlines and courtyards where parents can watch their children, that of course, inspired a certain Austrian designer to reimagine an enclosed public realm where mothers of young children would feel safe with their children to move through the world. And that was Victor Gruen, who, of course, famously and infamously invented the shopping mall, which is the subject of your next book. And I want to take a little bit of time to ask you about this because again, another another post-pandemic development is the shopping mall as it exists, particularly in the United States. And also, more broadly what retail is. I'd like to quote, since I'm in Texas, USAA Real Estate Chief Economist Will McIntosh who once told me the problem with America is not that

it's over retailled is that it's under demolished. Meaning so much of it is dead and just simply needs to be torn down. And so what futures do you see for that? Because we have this trend, the flight from cities didn't happen, but a lot of those families did move. They moved out of high cost coastal metros into larger homes on the fringes of Sunbelt metros and elsewhere, which is exactly where mall territory is. So I'm curious how your past book and next one, which comes out in June 2022, will link together here in terms of thinking about what this urban future means and what kind of public realm do we want. Cause a lot of them exited cities, or so it seems, to move out to these larger metros, which is of course, where America has been moving for 50 years. So not much has changed there in that regard.

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Alexandra Lange 23:13

Yeah, they left the cities and they moved to their single family homes, and now they are lonely and are searching for a place to go. And that was exactly the niche that Victor Gruen was designing for when he essentially invented the mall in the 1950s. So my book really traces the whole trajectory of the idea of the mall and a number of physical malls from the 1950s to the present day. It was important for me to do that, because the ideas that Gruen was operating with were very attuned to human nature. And I don't think human nature has changed that much. So while yes, the mall die off has been accelerated by the pandemic, there are still successful malls and I still think malls are needed by people. The idea that all shopping would be replaced by online shopping has never been true. And while that again has been accelerated, now, people are perhaps not shopping for clothes so much in the physical environment, but they're definitely shopping for food in the physical environment. They're seeking entertainment in the physical environment. And so I think we have already seen people going back to malls this Christmas season and I think these huge sprawling suburban developments are going to need a town center and that town center is more likely at this stage in the capitalist game to be provided by a mall company than it is by some like organic upswelling of shops.

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Greg Lindsay 24:52

Well, yes, I absolutely. I totally agree. I'm here in Dallas today and I'm downtown for this trip, but on previous visits going to see things like legacy West in Plano, Texas or Frisco, which is one of the fastest growing cities over the last decade in the United States, where suburban office parks are going to be converted into millennial family playlands and mixed use urban development there. So it seems like that's certainly one trajectory for that. What would be your exemplar then of what the mall is going to evolve into, or where the mall starts to come back into the kind of pocket urban realm that Victor Gruen originally envisioned?

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Alexandra Lange 25:23

Well, I've cited this example a lot. And so, maybe it's too obvious to people. But I really like the ACC Highland development in Austin, which is the Austin Community College, which took over one of Austin's first suburban malls. It has now turned it into a community college campus that's near a light rail station and has new housing built in the former parking lots, and also a branch of the Austin Public TV station there. So it's students, it's housing, it's not only reachable by car, and it's also office development. So I think truly mixed use developments that have



some retail in them are where things are headed. Like legacy West, you mentioned, it has shops and it has hotels and offices, but it doesn't really have housing. So most people who are working in those stores or in those offices are still driving in and out to it. So it's an island, like the old fashioned malls were. So I feel like the next wave has to truly have a 24/7 environment, and hopefully have better forms of public transportation so you're not just making these little island cities all over the land that people still have to drive between.

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Greg Lindsay 26:47

As a final question, given the accelerating speed of the climate crisis, have you seen hopeful signs that those conversions are happening? Because I know, great practitioners like Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williams have been talking about retrofitting suburbia and retrofitting malls for at least over a decade at this point. But, it's still only a handful of examples. Is there a toolkit in place and is that going to gather in speed? Or is it still a handful of leaders in this? What's the prognosis on that?

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Alexandra Lange 27:18

I don't think there's a toolkit in place yet. But I do think that given the number of malls that are dying, and their locations, typically in inner and second ring suburbs, in environments that are already densifying, there's going to be a lot of push to build on those sites, and consider them essentially as grayfields for new development. And from an environmental point of view, and this is also what ACC Highland found out, it was much cheaper to retrofit the existing mall building than it was to tear it down and start from scratch. So I think as material prices rise, people are gonna see a lot of economic wisdom in retrofitting existing mall structures and building on their parking lots, because they're in great locations. And they can save money that way, while building new parts of the city.

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Greg Lindsay 28:11

No, absolutely. Again, that goes back to great exemplar projects like Del Mar in metro Denver and others that preserve a lot of the mall structure and turn them into communities. Well, I guess as a final question, Alexandra, is this the opportunity to square the circle here. Given the fact that these are demographic areas where families have moved to, are these places where we rebuild? Again, I think of places like Stapleton, also in Denver. I visited Stapleton 15 years ago, and it was designed to be an intergenerational community. When I was there it was mostly young families, it was this incredible new urbanist infill under the site of the former airport. Can you see how these things fit together?

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Alexandra Lange 28:58

I definitely think there's a lot of opportunity there. Because those families need a place to go, those families may want to be closer to their senior relatives now, knowing what the pandemic has brought. Those environments need to be designed for the same kind of accessibility and year round use as shopping malls were originally invented to do. I'm hopeful that going through

the history of shopping malls will show people the good parts about them, the parts that were actually community spirited and democratic. And that maybe we can bring some of those back, while also bringing greater density to some of these sprawl areas.



Greg Lindsay 29:40

Great. Well, that sets out a perfect urban agenda to carry us into the holidays. So, thank you so much for joining us, Alexandra. Thank you all, as always, for listening, not just to this episode, but this entire season of threesixtyCITY. Wishing all of you who are listening wonderful holidays, and we'll be back in 2022 with a brand new season.